

**Senate Education and Cultural Resources Committee hearing
On the BVCC Resolution, February 11, 2009**

Via Chairman Ripley,

Good Afternoon members of the Committee – My name is Deborah Rogala (spell out loud), and I am a trustee elect and board chair of the Bitterroot Valley Community College Effort.

It is my honor and privilege to be here today on behalf of the thousands of Bitterroot Valley residents who signed the petition to put this initiative on the ballot and who voted to tax themselves to bring education to this remote and spectacular landscape we call the Bitterroot, and for the hundreds of thousands of hours that regular, hard working residents of the Bitterroot Valley, folks from all walks of life, differing political persuasions, and backgrounds as varied as Montanas mountains put into each and every step of this effort.

I wish to take time today to thank ~~all of the~~ residents of the Bitterroot for believing in this 'big idea', for their unwavering support over the ~~last 3 years~~, and for their perseverance, which we all know is one of the qualities every true Montanan must have.

I stand before you today, representing many faces of the Bitterroot Valley Community. This journey has been a long hard road with many lessons learned late, more data and research compiled than we board members ever wanted to know, and many trials and tribulations. We who were able to make this trip today know that you, the committee members have heard much about our efforts from those who seek to tell us what we need, but who don't live in the Bitterroot; today I hope you will listen with open hearts to those of us who do.

Last fall, Deputy Commissioner Mary Moe came to a trustee elect BVCC board meeting. During our conversation with her, she remarked, "You have all done an outstanding job on this effort, but you do know what they say about higher education in Montana, don't you?" No, I said, what do "they say?" Deputy Moe replied, "There's too many institutions of higher education in Montana, we certainly don't need any more." I, along with the other 6 trustee elects were startled almost to the point of speechlessness, but I managed to stammer a response – "Deputy Moe, nobody says that in the

Bitterroot, nobody. I don't know where you hang your hat, but we all travel around the state in many different capacities and none of us have ever heard that. "

What that statement really said to all of us was that those that oversee and participate at the top levels of education in Montana are totally out of touch with the needs of many of the states residents, mainly the 36,000 residents of the Bitterroot who had no locally accessible opportunities for higher education at that point in time, and indeed, had not ever had any.

You have no doubt heard about the Uof M's attempt to herald higher education into the Bitterroot in the guise of their Higher Education Center, but that institution has met with very little positive response, and I will let others speak of that when it is their time later today.

We who live in the Bitterroot know first hand the economies of the rural landscape - we know our neighbors desire to 'better themselves', we know their children's dreams of becoming the first in their family to get a college education, we know first hand the failures of many who have tried unsuccessfully to negotiate the complex juggling act it is to attend classes in Missoula while working the family ranch; we know the pain of parents driving home from class late at night only to kiss their children's foreheads good night before heading out before dawn to get to class again the next morning; we know the heart ache of students who flunk out of the 4 year system, come home with a huge debt, undone by the 'big education machine' which they fail to navigate...we know the stories of the Bitterroot, and they are many!

In our research, we have learned much, and I would point out some facts you may be unaware of:

- Community colleges serve a range of students, including those who are most likely to have academic, financial and personal challenges.
- 29% of community college students have annual household incomes of less than \$20,000.
- 41% of community college students are first generation college attendees.

- Community colleges educate a diverse mix of students with dramatically varying goals, including getting a better job, earning a community college certificate or an associate degree, and earning a bachelor's degree.
- Community colleges educate students who have significant time commitments – to their families, their jobs, and their communities.*

With these facts in mind, does it make sense that our Bitterroot Valley residents so in need of educational opportunities, should commute to Missoula, at best a 2 ½ hour trek each day they attend class?

Our need for an educated work force is ever-increasing, not only in Montana but the Nation as a whole. We need to educate a competitive workforce and stimulate our local economies. To achieve these goals, we must provide opportunity and maximize success for everyone – even those of us who choose to live in the Bitterroot!

Higher levels of education correlate positively with higher levels of civic participation. Each taxpayer dollar invested in a community college yields \$3 in benefits in regional economic development and growth that lead to increased state and local tax receipts. Students who attain their educational goals improve their own lives and benefit their communities and our nation as a whole.*

We, the BVCC effort, have taken into account the current economic situation our nation and state are in, and now are asking simply that the Montana legislature give us the power to do what our community voted for, that of bringing affordable, accessible, comprehensive, and accountable educational opportunities to the Bitterroot. We are asking for you, the legislative powers that be, to authorize our organization, with no monies for this biennium, in order that we may proceed with planning for this most important of ideas to bear fruit not only for the Bitterroot, but for all of Montana.

Thank you for your time today and for your
 * Facts taken from the newsletter of Achieving the Dream, Community Colleges Count

service to the people of Montana.